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THE  
MISSION AND PROBLEM  
OF  
AMERICAN SOCIETY.  
AN ADDRESS  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE  
LITERARY SOCIETIES

OF  
CENTRE COLLEGE,

June 28th, 1848.

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BY J. D. NOURSE, Esq.,  
Of Bardstown, Ky.

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DANVILLE, KY:  
ZIMMERMAN & BARBEE, PRS.—TRIBUNE OFFICE:  
1848.

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DEAR SIR:—

We, the undersigned, have been appointed a committee, to request for publication, a copy of your very excellent address, delivered before the literary societies of Centre College, on the evening of June 28th, 1848. It is requested, in the belief, that a paper of so high a literary tone, replete with so many interesting truths, so originally presented, would be read with interest and avidity by all those who appreciate literary merit, and that it would have a beneficial influence upon society at large.

Respectfully,

LAFAYETTE JONES,  
GILON H. ROUT,  
ALEX. SNEED,  
T. SWOPE,  
G. B. FLEECE,  
A. L. WALLAS,

J. D. NOURSE, Esq.

*Committee.*

*Gentlemen:* I have received your note, requesting a copy of the address, which I had the honor to deliver before the societies which you represent. Deeply sensible of the flattering estimate, you have placed upon my effort, I herewith furnish you with a copy, as requested.

Yours, Respectfully,

J. D. NOURSE

Messrs. JONES, and others, Committee.



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## A D D R E S S .

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*Gentlemen of the Deinologian and Chamberlain Societies:—*

A short time before I received notice of the honor which you had conferred upon me, I accepted an invitation to address a literary society in another institution. It was my wish and purpose to devote several months to the completion of a literary undertaking, which I had been encouraged to prosecute by favorable notices of some essays that I had published on the philosophy of social progress. That enterprise I have found myself under the necessity of postponing indefinitely. It occurred to me that a part of the speculations, of which I had sketched the outline, by making some changes in style and arrangement, might be easily divided and compressed into two discourses, each of which would be perfectly appropriate to the anniversary of a literary association.—The two subjects are so connected that a brief summary of the former discourse will form a suitable introduction to the remarks which I shall offer for your consideration.

In the address alluded to, I endeavored to show that the popular literature of an age, embodies with peculiar intensity and comprehensiveness the prevailing spirit and profoundest tendencies of society, and may, therefore, be regarded as marking the stage, and manifesting the phenomena of social progress quite as clearly as those public transactions which find a place in history. Genius affords a common medium of sympathy between the earnest and thoughtful. The crude and timid processes of many minds run together and start up into definite shape, harmonious completeness, and active concurrence, when the proper chords are struck by the master-hand of him who combines deep feeling and wide sympathies with daring and capacious intellect; who can vitally connect the thought of his own age and country with the thought of all ages and countries, by discerning with more or less clearness, in all that is peculiar, and transitory, some element of the universal and perennial. The confluent tide of thought and feeling in turn bears along with it, not only the mind which set it in motion, but others per-



haps equally powerful, which may add to its depth and volume, or cause it to deposit more or less of the sediment of error, but cannot change its general direction, before it is finally dispersed in the ocean of mind, Combining and comparing the indications of action and literature, I characterized the age just gone by as eminently one of revolt, scepticism and destruction. The tremendous reaction of the human mind against an accumulation of abuses and superstitions, carried it to the opposite extreme, and shook the foundations of all belief and reverence. Revolutionary ardor buried, under the ruins of ancient institutions, much of the truth and good, which have found in them a shelter and dwelling place for many generations. The spirit of the present age, I remarked, is in part a reaction against that of the last, and partly a prolongation of the same movement. The work of pulling down, has lately been resumed with more vigor than ever; but in a better spirit and under happier auspices, for men are more disposed to recognise what was good in the past, and to find, not in dreams of their own, but in what survives the ruin of the old, the deep foundations and enduring materials of the new social edifice. Our own country, with its free press, its tolerant christianity, and its glorious inheritance of Anglo-Norman liberty, is in a peculiar sense a grand link of vital connection between the past and the future. While France is attempting to form a Federal Republic, and Germany is reconstructing her ancient freedom, with such modifications as are demanded by the progress of society, and Italy is stirring beneath the feet of her crowned, and coronetted, and mitred tyrants, and England is perhaps preparing to throw off those anomalies which still incrust and disfigure her constitution; our own country, the mightiest and clearest embodiment of the tendencies of modern society, is moving, a pillar of cloud and of fire, in the van of the christian civilization. At this point I was arrested by entering the limits of the subject which I had reserved for the present occasion; *the mission and problems of American Society*; in other words, *the duties of American mind* arising from the relations which now subsist, and are likely to subsist hereafter, between this republic and the general progress of freedom, knowledge and civilization. There are two leading ideas, without which human affairs are little better than a pathless waste of crime, imposture, decay and ruin, and history a record of changes devoid of purpose and significance. These ideas are Progress and Providence.—Without them we must look upon the mass of mankind, in all ages, as a host of pilgrims, toiling on through a scorching sahara, never allowed to rest at the isles of verdure which dot the dreary landscape, but lured

on by the delusive mirage, to be finally stifled by the simoon, and buried under the drifting sands of the desert. These ideas are so connected, that the one cannot exist without the other, for progress is the only conceivable object of superinducing a Providential economy upon the natural and moral government of the world, and Providence is the only guarantee of progressive and durable improvement. We may, with propriety, for the sake of still greater simplicity, consider the idea of progress, as included in the one great illuminating idea of a beneficent Providence.

I cling to this idea because hope is a better counsellor than despair. It is not a mere barren speculation. It may support him who falls upon "evil days and evil tongues," with an assurance of the ultimate triumph of truth and justice, and strengthen him for the work to which he is called by natural gifts and circumstances. It may become to the patriot or reformer a star of hope, going before him through the darkest hour of peril and disaster, to guide his unfaltering footsteps to the birth-place of freedom and the cradle of redemption. This world is a great battle ground, and in the mighty conflict with ignorance, falsehood, and injustice, each of us, from the general of division, to the soldier in the ranks, will fight better, if we believe that the whole field is under the eye of One, whose wisdom and resources give us an assurance of final victory over the Devil and his legions. This idea only becomes mischievous, when from a rational confidence in a higher Wisdom, Power and Love, bringing good out of evil, it is perverted into some presumptuous notion of "manifest destiny," which may serve as a pretext and disguise for rapacity and ambition. Justly applied, it will help to "dilate our conceptions with the kindling majesty" of the mission of this republic, and the duties of those who, in any capacity, take the lead of American Society. A confident hope, under the guidance of Providence, of ultimate triumph over the social evils that afflict humanity, should not cause us to forget the probable perils and vicissitudes of the conflict, and the share which each of us may have in retarding or accelerating the glorious consummation. The assurance of victory, with which the heroes of Buena Vista met the shock of the enemy, did not cause any one of them to drop his weapons, and remain an idle spectator of the combat.

While, as I trust I shall be able to show, there are good grounds for hope in the Providential indications which may be found in the history of our country, the only thing which stands out with perfect clearness in the light thrown upon the future by the past and the present, is a vast influence to be exerted by this nation over human affairs, a mighty



destiny to be evolved in glory or in shame, or both, through a succession of moral triumphs, or vicissitudes of crime, disaster, and misery.

Of the Providential indications of a glorious mission for American Society, one of the most striking is the peculiar juncture at which the English colonies were planted on this continent. A leading fact of modern history, is the struggle of liberty against arbitrary power, which first took the attitude of open and decided hostility in England, during the earlier part of the seventeenth century. Of the sudden and rapid growth which then took place, in the light and warmth of a free christianity, of those germs of liberty which had for ages been lurking in the English constitution and English Society, a hardy offshoot was planted in the virgin soil of America. Assailed by the rudest blasts, and exposed in its infancy to all the vicissitudes of an inhospitable wilderness, it has sent out its roots wide and deep, and climbed through the region of the storm, until, "its top is now in the heavens and its shadow over a continent."

When the eagle of Rome was folding his wings to die and be entombed in the ruins of the ancient world, it was little thought that from his remains, and the wreck made by his destroyers, was to spring up, under the reviving breath of christianity, a more expansive, diversified, and enduring civilization. Modern history is the record of this stupendous resurrection, of which the most striking fact is the gradual evolution of that true liberty, which was unknown even in the republican states of antiquity. The main stem of this progress is found in that tribe of free Saxons who at an early period, were drawn away from their native forests to an inland in the Atlantic, where, cut off by the sea, from causes that proved fatal to liberty on the continent, they received the political education of a thousand years.

While the germs of modern improvement were advancing towards maturity in the old world, the wide field for their expansion in the new lay under the darkness which, until the appointed time, was permitted to rest upon the western ocean. On the evening of the day in which the barons extorted from King John the great charter of English liberty, no one, who, from the western cliff, of the "fast anchored isle," saw the sun sink behind the crest of the Atlantic wave, could have dreamed that he was pursuing his radiant journey over mighty regions, where solitude reigned in the recesses of primeval forests, and over vast lakes and rivers, one day to be plowed by the steamboat, but which at that time, while the winds were asleep in their caves, were unruffled save by the wild fowl or the specre bark of the Indian hunter, as it glided across the flashing surface.



But the time fixed for lifting the curtain from the secrets of the western deep at length arrived. Soon after the voyages of Columbus, and while the adventurers who followed him were revealing to startled Europe the vast extent of his discovery, the hammer with which Luther nailed his theses to the church door, in a little saxon city, was sounding on the clock of eternity the knell of an old era, and announcing the birth of a great moral revolution: The effects of the reformation upon civil liberty were modified in each country by local circumstances, but they may be fairly tested by contrasting Great Britain, in which Protestant dissent was most prevalent, with Spain, from which it was most carefully excluded. In the early part of the seventeenth century these two countries represented respectively the two great antagonisms of modern Society. Spain was the peculiar stronghold of civil and spiritual despotism. In all parts of Europe ecclesiastical authority sought to strengthen itself against the new tendencies of society, by allying itself with the secular power. In Spain, from causes which I cannot now dwell upon, this alliance was singularly close, and the success of the clergy in suppressing freedom of thought was remarkably speedy and complete. They had sought of course the strongest part of the civil government, which happened to be the executive, for Spain was the greatest military power on earth, and the King was the chief of the army. By the union of monarchical, military and ecclesiastical powers, the free Gothic Constitutions were overthrown. The representative assemblies lost all real power, and merely registered the edicts of a succession of gloomy tyrants, who, in the recesses of the Escorial, moved the springs of that iron despotism which had laid its fatal grasp upon the southern portions of America. The last sparks of free thought were quenched in blood. The literary glories of the country of Cervantes and Calderon sunk and expired in that midnight of the human intellect which still broods over Spain and most of her former dependencies.

Of those dependencies, Mexico was the most wealthy and populous, and that ill fated country still shows the effects of the connection. It is much easier to shake off political dependence than the vassalage of manners, habits and institutions. In Spain and Mexico, all freedom of thought is suppressed by Clerical intolerance. In both, the mass, of the people are sunk in apathy, ignorance and superstition. Both present the same deplorable spectacle of external weakness and internal disorganization.

Meanwhile, in England, civil right and religious liberty, united for mu-

tual support, and gradually gained strength enough for a great struggle with arbitrary power and ecclesiastical despotism. Had the English Colonies been planted at the same time that the Spaniards conquered Mexico, American Society would probably have been an image of the England of Henry the Seventh and Eighth, when the free principles of the English constitution were a dead letter, when Parliament and the courts of justice were the pliant tools of arbitrary power, and the church was in quiet possession of the human mind. But the settlement of Anglo-America was happily postponed till the heroic age of the mother country.

The fact, which first waked up the spirit of inquiry, and infused new life into the liberal portion of the English constitution, was the anomalous position of the new spiritual despotism founded by Henry the Eighth, and consolidated by his imperious daughter. Destitute of the *prestige* and venerable associations of the ancient church, the new establishment was compelled to combat the Catholics with arguments that sapped the foundations of her own authority, while those which she employed against dissenters affected their persons and property, but left their minds untouched, except to rouse them to determined resistance.

The next fact, was the union of the two British crowns in the house of Stuart, which brought the republican Calvinism of Scotland into closer connection and warmer sympathy with the various forms of dissent, which in England were gaining ground, and about to unite against the common enemy.

The third fact, resulting from the two former, was the alliance of religious freedom with civil liberty. This union was natural in itself, on account of the affinities between them, but was greatly promoted by the circumstance, that resistance to a spiritual despotism, founded as well as supported by the state, readily suggested inquiry, into the abuses of the civil administration which had, while upholding the church in her intolerable tyranny, departed very widely from the noblest principles of the English constitution.

Such was the juncture at which the English colonies were planted on this continent. Almost the next gale, after that which had wafted the bark of the Pilgrims across the Atlantic, brought to the ears of the settlers the first thunders of that great conflict between liberty and power, which, to quote my own words in another place, has been the leading historical fact of the last two centuries, and has sent pale Fear into the palaces of Kings, through triple guards and crowded antechambers, to write on the innermost wall the doom of tyrants.

Thus America was the first-born of freedom, a hardy offset from the



rapid and vigorous growth of free principles in the mother country. Its childhood and youth were worthy of its birth from the first throes of a great revolution. The colonist had to subdue the wilderness, defend himself against the savage, and maintain the contest for freedom, which was once more prostrate in England. There was still, however, much in common between the colonies and the mother country. There were the same free laws, the same notions of right, the same spirit of inquiry on both sides of the Atlantic. But happily, the new world was an ungenial soil for those old feudal and ecclesiastical institutions, which in Europe have retarded the progress of liberty.

I will not detain you by showing how the colonies, planted at different times and varying in local circumstances, bound together as parts of one empire, yet separate and distinct so far as regarded their internal and domestic concerns, which, in some of them at least, were regulated by legislative assemblies, similar in constitution and privileges to the popular branch of the British Parliament, became the germs of our federal republic. I will content myself with the general remark, that no social organization can live, which does not grow up naturally from the circumstances of each society; which is not vitally connected with former modes of thought and habits of the people, or engrafted upon the stocks of old institutions. The attempts of radicals to substitute their own dreams and systems for the natural and progressive development of society, are, of all hopeless enterprises, the most utterly chimerical. If any country in this age of revolutions, instead of setting herself to reconstruct upon the old foundations, or according to a model approved by time and experience, with such modifications as may be required by her own particular stage of social progress, shall abandon herself to socialists, and system-mongers, she must perish in an anarchy of crotchets worse confounded than the elemental strife of chaos. For when men abandon entirely the common ground of prescription, none of the visionaries can see why his own little theory of society should yield to any other, and all will be found equally wanting, when confronted with the infinite complexities of the actual world.

To this remark, our own country is no exception, though in regard to its origin, it is unlike every other that has played a very important part in human affairs. The beginning of our national existence is not enveloped in the obscurity of fabulous ages, and for the first time the clear light of authentic history shines on the cradle of a great nation. Yet it can be easily shown, that our true life, as a people, is but the expansion of germs which had for ages existed in European society before they were

transplanted to America. We may trace the vital roots of our social organism in the forests of Germany, the mystic groves of Etruria, from which issued the Roman power, the pine-crested steeps that grow over "Delphi's long deserted shrine," the rushy banks of the Nile, and the clefts of Horeb, where from the burning bush, the Legislator of the Hebrews first heard the voice of the Eternal. The fate of all social systems, by which men have attempted to interrupt that great law of progressive development, which vitally links all ages and generations, ought to abate the confidence of those sceptics and radicals, who flatter themselves that the movements of this age are making a clear field for their own chimeras.

The social system of America is the confluence of many streams of moral and intellectual life, rising in distant ages and climes, and filtered, if I may be allowed the expression, by passing the Atlantic, like that river which in Grecian fable was represented as lost to view, and passing through sea and land, until it once more burst into light as the chrysalis of Arethusa. The growth of our country has been worthy of the convergence of such vast Providential arrangements. The stream of life has rolled on with ever increasing volume and power, as if instinct with a resistless destiny, through the forests and over the prairies, reached the defiles of the Rocky Mountains, and circling the feet of these snow-crowned monarchs of the western wilderness, is even now waking the echoes of the rock-bound shores of the South sea. The westward extension of our race and social system have brought them into collision with those of Spanish America, and an unbroken series of miraculous victories has planted the American standard on the towers of the Mexican capital. Imagination herself closes her eyes and folds her wings in trembling awe before the probable future of this mighty republic, spreading from ocean to ocean; on one side throwing back upon Europe the shadow of her greatness and the moral power of her institutions; on the other, confronting with a spectacle of moral life and free activity, the embalmed remains of the oriental civilization.

I need not tell you of the eagerness, with which the inventions of science have been seized upon, or the vast scale upon which they have been applied to the increase of commercial facilities, the rapid transit of intelligence, and the promotion of the material prosperity of our country. It is true, that in all this, she only partakes of the general characteristics of an age, which has harnessed the fire-horse to the car of commerce, pencils likenesses with the sunbeam, and makes the lightning a news carrier. But she partakes of them more largely than any other



country, for no where else have the conquests of man over nature been so rapid and extensive. Witness the rapidity with which a web of telegraphs has been spread over the land, forming the nervous system of a body, of which our great rivers have been made the arteries, and our railways the ligaments. Our progress in all the arts that minister to the physical well being of man, has fully kept pace with the marvellous growth and extension of our population. For intellectual culture, our provision exceeds in quantity, if not in quality, any ever known before or elsewhere on earth. The actual amount of wholesome truth held in solution by the inundation of ephemeral literature; in other words, the proportion which the culture of the moral and higher mental faculties, bears to the intellectual activity which ministers to material interests, or mere amusement, involves one of the great problems of American Society.

The fact which stands out in bold relief, from all our speculations on the future destinies of this country, is a stupendous power for good or evil, in a state of extraordinary activity. It is folly to think of arresting the progressive tendency, which is extending our population, and developing our resources of physical greatness with such marvellous rapidity. We might as well try to dam the Mississippi. But we may raise moral "levees," and make new outlets, or rather, widen and deepen some of the old ones, so that the fertile wilderness, which the swelling waters could otherwise devastate, or cause to teem with a rank and unwholesome vegetation, may become a garden of moral and intellectual beauty.

I will ask your attention to some facts, in the present state of American Society, which cannot fail to suggest fearful foreboding to every one who has at heart, the highest welfare of our country. Eagerness in the pursuit of wealth and honor, is, from obvious causes, a striking trait of all democratic societies, and within certain limits, may be productive of much good, by stimulating talent and industry. But it is true of every agency, that in proportion to its power for good within the proper bounds, will be its power for evil, if allowed to transcend them. Of the perils incident to that social condition, which throws open to all the paths to wealth and distinction, there is one form to which I wish to confine your attention, not only for the sake of simplicity, but on account of the portentous aspect, which it has assumed in this country.—The evil derives its enormous magnitude from causes connected with the Executive department of the general government.

In treating this subject, I will say nothing which ought to offend a

liberal adherent of either of the political parties. I would not undertake to say which of them has had the larger share in bringing about the state of things to which I allude. It has grown up from causes for which neither of them is exclusively responsible. It has been, in fact, by gradual and scarcely perceptible accretions, that party despotism has reached its present, or rather, I will say, its *late* unrivalled and intolerable perfection, for there are just now, some signs of reaction, and reviving independence.

Whenever one of the great parties has improved its tactics, or fallen upon some new means of preserving and strengthening its own organization, the other, in self-defence, soon overtakes, and perhaps outstrips it, rendering necessary a further advance on the part of the opposite faction. Thus they have marched, like the hosts of Wellington and Marmont, almost side by side, to those successive conflicts, upon each of which, have been staked almost all the honors and offices of the country. The few stragglers, thrown off into the neutral ground, or passing from one to the other, have been exposed to two fires, or quietly dropped behind. By this emulation, party organization has reached a perfection of tactics and discipline, which crushes individuality and freedom of opinion, almost as effectually as the tyranny of the Autocrat of all the Russias. The servility with which the dicta, of one or more leading men, when once recognized as symbols of faction, and even the stereotyped slang of party, are echoed and re-echoed all over the land, with scarcely a variation of manly independence, by subalterns of the press and the rostrum, some of whom, more unfortunate even than Ezau, have sold their birthright without any certainty of ever getting the mess of pottage, would be ridiculous if it were not deplorable. Wo be to him, who dares to enter his protest against the most flagrant injustice, or folly of his party, or its acknowledged leaders. It were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were cast into the depths of the sea, for if he do not make amends by speedy retraction and submission, he will be branded as a traitor, and almost exiled from the charities of civilized life. It has of late years come to this that, no man must raise his voice against the errors of his party, or against social abuses, in which any considerable body of men happen to be interested, for fear of injuring the prospects of that host of greedy aspirants, whose hopes of worldly advancement are invested in the political lottery. For my own part, as I have a God, a country that I love, and a soul to be saved, I do utterly defy, as I have heretofore done, this hydra-headed tyranny, at the risk of having my own prospects blasted by his hissing breath and poisoned fang.



I know very well that parties must exist in every free country, and within certain limits, are very useful, by watching and checking one another. Their leaders are the counsel on each question of policy, and on the trial of public men before the popular tribunal. But it is plain, that the jury ought not to partake of the bias and passions of the advocates. There ought to be a body of intelligent men sufficiently free from party prepossessions, to render a just verdict upon *each distinct issue*, on its own particular merits, as it comes up for their decision.

The actual fact is, and the leaders know it very well, that, with all the professions on each side, of high regard for principle, sincere, no doubt, in many cases, millions of dollars, in the shape of salaries and perquisites of office, are staked upon the issue of each of our great political conflicts. Every four years the Presidency, with all its attendant patronage, is to be scrambled for in the arena of popular agitation. Scarcely is the incumbent warm in his seat, and his friends snugly installed in their places, when the defeated party begins to marshal its forces for another conflict. The vast and glittering spoil stimulates to the highest pitch, the selfish passions of human nature. If actual possession is a great advantage on one side, it must not be forgotten, that while there can be but one holder of each office at a time, among those in power, there may be a dozen seekers in the ranks of the opposition.

As the time for the next canvass approaches, Congress becomes a focus of intrigues which are ramified throughout the country, and the interests of the nation are almost forgotten, while the politicians are busy in thwarting or forwarding the views of prominent aspirants to the Presidency. A disproportionate amount of talent, diverted from more productive pursuits, is enlisted in the warfare, and employed in persuading the people that the salvation of the country is staked upon the result of the contest. The popular mind is stirred into a feverish excitement, which is more and more inflamed as the final struggle approaches. At length the parties hold their conventions, choose their leaders, marshal their forces for the decisive encounter, and enforce with greater vigor than ever, a discipline, more relentless than that of a regular army. The vast spoil which will reward the victors, holds out temptations too strong for the virtue of needy or grasping politicians. Scruples are broken down, conscience is silenced, and fatal wounds inflicted upon the moral sensibilities. The voice of truth and justice can scarcely be heard in the tempest of passion. The air is darkened

with missiles, not merely the polished shafts of wit and logic and eloquence, but sticks, and stones, and mud. The country is inundated with papers, full of wretched slang and scurrility, which pander to the lowest tastes, and to the blindest prejudices. All these things, it is true, are symptoms of an intermittent fever, to which all free countries are more or less liable, but that the disease has of late risen to a fearful and dangerous height in this country, must be plain to all who have any skill in social pathology.

A delirium of political agitation, with scarcely a lucid interval, is very unpropitious to the culture of the higher faculties, and incompatible with a *due* attention to those great interests of humanity, in comparison with which, most of the objects of party strife sink into insignificance. There is a remarkable want of earnestness among our leading men upon subjects of the highest import. They soon learn to suppress their opinions, if they have any, in relation to such matters, and even to countenance error and social abuses, for the sake of the votes or influence of those who are interested in their perpetuation.—The amount of mental activity, expended upon the objects of political strife, is greatly out of proportion to their real importance. How diseased must be that soul, which is languid or asleep, while poetry, philosophy and religion unfold the beautiful, mysterious and imperishable realities of the Universe, but wakes up into a tempest of excitement about a tax of a few cents on cotton goods. There are thousands who turn away from the most glorious creations of art and genius, the most startling revelations of science, the most luminous exposition of the laws and principles of the Divine government, to devour with eagerness the state commonplaces of every Congressional declaimer, who, to let Buncombe know that he is alive, must set up anew some man of straw that has already been knocked down and thrashed to pieces an hundred times, and forthwith proceed to demolish him, getting up as much thunder about it as if the exploit were miraculous. To perpetuate this delusion as to the comparative importance of the ordinary topics of party discussion, is obviously the interest of those who throng all the paths to political preferment, and by their efforts to draw or to fix attention upon themselves, and those from whom they expect favors, keep the public mind in a state of feverish excitement. Art, literature, religion, are almost stifled by the everlasting dust with which the political races fill the atmosphere. The smoke of one conflict has scarcely cleared away before another commences, and the sun of Eternal Truth must look dimly through the haze of a vast battlefield in which



the meanest passions of human nature are exulting over prostrate foes; and rioting in the spoils of victory.

I am aware that the evils I have attempted to point out are, to some extent, unavoidably incident to free institutions. That the young giant of Democracy, who has been fed upon the flesh of Kings and nobles, whose childish pranks in other climes have been over turning thrones and setting the world on fire, should, in this country, where he is a chartered libertine, be fond of kicking up a dust in his frequent "*sprees*," is not a matter of surprise. But it is no small thing to know which way lies the evil tendency of society, that each of us may give our aid to strengthen the restraining or mitigating tendencies. When we find that any of the social forces has gained a perilous ascendancy, it becomes our duty to lend a helping hand to its prostrate antagonists.

This brings us to the inquiry, what are the antagonists to the dangerous tendencies of democratic societies? What are the available means of restraining the fierce pursuit of wealth and distinction through the medium of political agitation? I answer, they are law, literature and religion. In the forum, the press, and the pulpit, we must find the means of raising and keeping up the tone of society, and holding in check, the tyranny of party, the greediness of demagogues, and the phrenzy of political excitement.

I have a few words to say in regard to that profession, the members of which have had so large a share in making, as well as administering the laws of this country. I have often thought with pleasure upon the dignity and conservative influence of legal pursuits, when kept pure from the turbid agitations of party politics. Not that I desire to see the able and faithful champion of private rights excluded from public trusts. On the contrary I think that the forensic wreath may both give and receive lustre, by being entwined with the laurels of the statesman. What I regret is, that the legal profession is regarded rather as a mere path to political distinction, than, as in itself, a noble pursuit, worthy of all the energies of powerful and cultivated intellect. The lawyer who rushes prematurely from the temple of justice, into the dusty arena of party strife, instead of waiting patiently for the rewards of talent and assiduity, is in danger of making himself a mere politician, and of never rising to the true dignity either of the jurist, or the statesman.— Yet the large share which lawyers have had and now have in our state and national legislation, is no doubt a fortunate circumstance.

The spirit of positive law delights in precedent and conventional right, and sets more value upon the stability of a rule than its conformity with

abstract theory. It is therefore hostile to the political radicalism, which would place all the laws and institutions of our country at the mercy of every transient gust of popular excitement. The excesses of this school of politics among us have heretofore been corrected by the good sense and moderation of a people educated for freedom, but there is no knowing what mischief may be done by the constant inculcation of false and dangerous views of society. The political philosophy of Mr. Jefferson has been pushed to extremes, which he would have been one of the first to deprecate. In the language of Burke, the extreme medicine of the state has been made its daily food. The ultimate and irresponsible sovereignty of the people, which is nothing more nor less than the right of revolution, is dragged forth from the sanctuary, where it ought to be reverently approached, by earnest and heroic men, only in solemn emergencies, and paraded before the public in such connections, that it is in danger of losing, in this country, as it has in Mexico, its majestic and terrible significance. Its suspension or *non user*, to borrow a legal phrase, is implied by the very existence of a Constitution, one object of which, if it be free, is to give effect in certain prescribed modes, and within certain limits, to the will of a conventional people defined by law, not comprising in any of our states more than one fourth, and usually not more than one seventh of the actual population. A free constitution excludes *sovereignty* altogether. It is purely a practical matter, an adaptation of means to ends. It ought, upon the basis of prescription and by the lights of experience, to distribute and organise the powers necessary for the well-being of society, in such a manner, that justice may be done to each and to all, that life and property, the freedom of speech and of the press, the rights of conscience, the safety and integrity of the state itself may have the most ample and permanent security, making allowances, of course, for the imperfections of all human institutions. While government fulfils these conditions to a reasonable extent, every individual has a sacred right to its protection and blessings, and no body of men have any right to overturn it, simply because it is their will and pleasure to show their physical power by pulling down a temple of constitutional liberty.

As extremes meet, the old maxim, that the "king can do no wrong," has been applied to transient majorities, of free white males over twenty-one years of age, by men, whom the same feelings, which make them demagogues in a republic, would make courtiers in a monarchy. There is not, and I hope there never will be in this country, any power capable of resisting the settled, and deliberate will of the people. But while



popular opinion is the life-blood of every free government, we must not forget that if the vessels be so relaxed as to yield too readily to an unusual pressure of the vital current, it may derange or destroy the organization which it is intended to preserve. There is a glorious and sublime sense in which it is true that the voice of the people is the voice of God. I refer to the great manifestations of that vital principle of an healthy society, which, like the *vis medicatrix* of the natural body, when invaded by the causes of disease, musters its force to expel the enemy, and remove the morbid condition; the mighty heavings of the great deep of popular mind breaking up through the crust of social abuses to terrify and regenerate the world; the ground-swell which undisturbed by the transient agitations of the surface of society, year after year or age after age, moves steadily in one direction as if instinct with the spirit or Providence of the Almighty.

This brings us to another great antagonist of the dangerous tendencies of democratic societies; the influence which may be exerted by the Press, as the vehicle of that higher order of literature, which not only sets to written music the hymn of Nature to her author, in all its variations, but gives clear and melodious utterance to the voice of the people when it is the voice of God; catches the tones of moral music which have been left behind on the Dead Sea of the Past, by the tempests of war and the thunders of revolutions; shows the foot-prints of Providence on the sands of Time; and collects the sybil leaves, that have been scattered abroad even over the dreariest tracts of human experience, into a revelation of beautiful sublimes and eternal verities. It is an hopeful fact, that literature is now much less infected, than it was during and about the close of the last century, with scepticism and licentiousness. It is true, there is still by no means so much earnestness as might be desired among our men of letters, who are too apt to content themselves with skimming the surface of nature and society. Yet I think there can be clearly discerned the dawn of a day of better things, when literature will no longer weakly shrink from the most sublime, mysterious and significant facts of human experience, but fearlessly grapple with them in a loving and docile spirit; when the Deity will no longer be carefully excluded from the world which he has created and redeemed; when great emotions that grasp at infinity will no longer be sneered at, or guilty left out of the pictures of human life and human nature; when history will no longer be regarded as a barren record of crime, imposture and degeneracy; when the warm gush of living faith

and earnestness and reverence will no longer be frozen in its very fount by the cold sophisms of an Epicurean philosophy.

Look for example at the manner in which historical inquiries are now conducted not only in France and Germany, but to a less extent in England and the United States. So great has been the change in a few years in this respect, that historical philosophy may be regarded as a new science, destined to effect a glorious revolution in intellectual culture. It tends to emancipate the mind from the narrow prejudices of schools, and sects, and parties. It is a sort of moral chemistry which analyzes the great facts of human experience and discriminates what is universal and imperishable from what is merely local and transitory, recognizes moral wants and moral affinities, even in their obscurest manifestations, as legitimate subject-matter of inductive science, finds some grains of pure gold even in the basest alloys of error, prejudice and passion, and traces the manifestations of the Divine Idea—the vital principle of society—through all the forms of social organization in which it has resided.

For the sake of illustration, I will call your attention to the most striking fact connected with the revolution which is taking place in the spirit and tendencies of literature. It is cheering to all who have at heart the highest welfare of their country and their race. A few years ago one might have been conversant with a wide range of history, philosophy and poetry, as well as fictitious and periodical literature, without knowing, if he had not learned it from other sources, that such a thing as the christian religion existed or ever had existed on earth, except as a poor popular superstition, long since consigned to the same grave with witchcraft and alchemy. Even a natural religion was scarcely recognized. Creative wisdom was excluded from Nature, and Providence from history. All that exalts our present existence and holds out the promise of another, was treated as mere delusion, useful perhaps in the existing state of society, but destined to vanish before the increasing light of knowledge. This life was a tragic-comedy performed on a theatre gaily decorated by the senses, and man a poor player, "who strutted and fretted his little hour upon the stage," and then vanished, no one knew or cared whither. The world was a "ship of fools," without rudder or helmsman, launched by chance upon an endless voyage through immensity.

But now there are thinkers, not theologians, but men of letters, who, with the scientific decision of a Hume, and the cool sarcastic rea-



son of a Voltaire, and with a logic far more profound and comprehensive than either of those writers ever dreamed of, are tracing through all its corruptions the vital power of christianity, in organizing and civilizing modern society, and showing in the sacrifices and idolatries of the ancient world, those moral wants and primitive traditions which divinely pointed to that central cluster of illuminating facts, the life, death and triumphs of the Divine Deliverer.

Literature ought ever to be the handmaid of Religion, which has close *affinities* with all exalted views of nature and history. The Press will perform its highest functions when men of letters, whether they put forth their thoughts in the fugitive form of periodical effusions, or in a more permanent shape, shall have an ever-present sense of the dignity of their vocation, as a priesthood of the sublime, the beautiful, the Divine, auxiliary to the ministry of Everlasting Truth.

We now come to the last in order, but the first in importance of the great conservative elements of progressive and democratic societies. Any remarks upon religion, considered as a system of doctrines, would be out of place on this occasion. Neither will I dwell upon its importance, or its necessity as an element of social organization. I need not remind you that the lever with which this world is to be moved must have its fulcrum in Eternity, that the fierce pursuit of worldly interests, which endangers our freedom and highest welfare, can be restrained only by motives drawn from another state of existence. I will content myself with a hasty glance at a great problem of society, which may receive its solution on this continent; I mean the union of moral power with freedom of opinion. It seems to me that Catholic unity and Protestant individuality both contain fragments of truth and good, which, torn from their mechanical juxtaposition, by the earthquake of the reformation, have not yet by any of the sects been cemented into a foundation wide enough for such a structure as is demanded by the moral wants of society. Religion, I am persuaded, cannot attain in our country, the full measure of its efficiency for good, until it combines with the stimulating effects of superficial diversity, an imposing front of essential unity, and a power of concurring effort, which are yet to be evolved from the chaos of sects and schisms. But I will not detain you further upon this subject, lest I should seem to encroach upon the province of those to whose especial custody it is confided.

As I remarked on a former occasion, we are evidently on the threshold of a stirring, productive and critical period in human affairs, du-

ring which all who shall have any considerable share in controlling the destinies of this republic, will occupy positions of peculiar and tremendous responsibility. The seeds of social revolutions, which were sown broadcast over Europe by the tempests of the last century, after a long interval of sunshine, in which the light of knowledge has been constantly spreading from the mountain-tops of society into the depths of its humblest valleys, have suddenly sprung up into the promise of a glorious harvest; but whether it shall fully realize our hopes, or be blighted once more by the breath of the Destroyer, is a question to be decided by those who are about to enter upon the stage of active life. The peculiar character of its institutions places this republic in the van of the christian civilization. The nations are struggling towards that advanced post of social progress which has been raised aloft by the American Democracy. It will be our task to keep that landmark on high in view of mankind, encircled with a blaze of literary, scientific and moral glories. Each of us may help to fan into a still brighter flame this beacon-light of humanity, until, like the signal fire which announced the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan war, it shall kindle responsive lights from shore to shore, from mountain top to mountain top, and even the distant isles of the sea shall catch the flying glory, and the world be wrapped in the glow of an illumination, over which the Intelligencies of Heaven may tune another and more glorious stanza of that celestial anthem, which celebrated the birthday of material light, when "the morning stars sang together and all the Sons of God shouted for joy."

Gentlemen of the Literary Societies of Centre College: What can I add to the force of the consideration which must suggest itself to you all, that you will shortly go forth from these academic shades, to take your places in bearing the ark of civil and religious freedom through the perils of an age, which will probably be more critical and productive, than any which has elapsed since the dawn of authentic history. Your alma mater stands high among the literary institutions, not only of the West, but of the Union, and as much has been given you, much will be required. You will be citizens, perhaps, in high and responsible positions, of this great republic, which is taking the lead in human affairs. I need not tell you that while you will be entrusted to a greater or less extent with the honor and freedom and prosperity of your own country, and through them with the interests of society at large, you will also be shaping your own temporal and eternal destinies. This is

ground upon which I must tread lightly, for I am sensible that I have made myself no title to urge upon you such high considerations. I may remark, however, that the essence of practical morality is, to do with our might the work for which we are best fitted by natural gifts and education, in such a spirit, and with such aims that we may be constantly rising towards the height of moral and intellectual attainments, which we may be capable of reaching. One more thought in this connection, and most of you may never again hear my voice on a public occasion.

You know, that, owing to the figure of the earth, in high latitudes of the North Atlantic, at a certain time of year, the eagle may soar through the mists and storms that darken the surface of that melancholly main, until he bathes his wing in a region of almost unceasing sunshine, for scarcely have the last hues of sunset faded in the West, when the Eastern horizon begins to glow with the rosy smile of Aurora, springing up joyfully from her ocean-slumber. Allow me in conclusion, to express the hope that the course of each of you may be not only onward, but upward, to that sphere of serene contemplation, in which the sitting radiance of a well-spent life, may blend with the opening glories of Eternity.



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